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This 'Jihadi' Is Armed With a Subversive Sense of Humor

Artist Totes Gold Gun, Tweaks Afghan Elite, Doles Out 'Reverse Bribes'

By *Dion Nissenbaum*

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KABUL—Dressed in a police uniform, Aman Mojadidi once set up a fake roadside checkpoint to hand out real money to befuddled Afghan motorists used to paying, not receiving, bribes.

Then, during last fall's parliamentary elections, the Florida-born Afghan artist took his antics a step further by covertly pasting Kabul walls with faux campaign posters that featured him in a black turban with a gold-plated pistol hanging around his neck.



Afghan-American artist Aman Mojadidi, the leading agent provocateur of the Afghan art scene, with one of his military props. ZALMAI FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"Vote for me," the posters urged. "I'm rich—and I've done jihad."

The stunts are part of a campaign the 40-year-old Afghan-American has been waging for the past three years against the excesses of the Afghan government, ranked as one of the world's most corrupt. In the process, he has become the leading agent provocateur of the nascent Afghan art scene.

"I think Aman can be a leader for Afghans in showing what provocative art can do in Afghanistan," said Tamim Samee, founder of Afghanistan's Contemporary Art Prize, a four-year-old competition meant to nurture the country's young artists.

In recent years, Mr. Mojadidi has helped train young Afghans about street graffiti, worked with Mr. Samee on the annual arts prize, and joined forces with expats who have injected a jolt of inspiration into Kabul's evolving artistic community.

"No one's doing as provocative and unusual stuff," says Nikki Diana

Marquardt, Mr. Mojadidi's Paris-based art dealer.

Kabul is now home to a small-but-growing number of experimental musical acts, including a heavy metal band and a popular indie group inspired by Britain's pop sensation Oasis.

Filmmakers have used American and European government money to produce movies on everything from Afghan women prisoners to the region's unusual sport of buzkashi, under which players on horseback vie for possession of a dead goat.



Aman Mojadidi

Mr. Mojadidi's use of the word jihad in his work is no coincidence. Here, it usually refers to the U.S.-backed Afghan war against Soviet troops in the 1980s.

Veterans of that struggle, known as mujahedeen, occupy the top rungs of power in President Hamid Karzai's administration—and many of these once-respected fighters have come under withering criticism for enriching themselves while on government service.

"Jihad," proclaims Mr. Mojadidi, "is the Afghan bling."

Mr. Mojadidi, who spent his teen years as a vegetarian, high-school dropout and surfer in Florida, most famously channeled widespread contempt for the country's corrupt leaders by adopting the persona of "Jihadi Gangster"—a comical blend of Afghan mujahedeen and American gangsta rappers.

The most controversial photograph from his "Jihadi Gangster" series—"After a Long Day's Work"—featured Mr. Mojadidi sitting on a couch in front of a gold-plated prosthetic leg and a table filled with alcohol, cashews and jade-tipped bullets.

With his black turban and golden gun hanging down below his long gray beard, Mr. Mojadidi was pictured blithely using a remote to switch TV channels as a scantily clad woman with a blue burqa covering her face fawned over her man.

The limited edition photos—one of which was auctioned off for \$14,000—have caused an uproar in Kabul.

When Afghan censors saw some of the tamer photographs from the series featured in the December issue of Kabul's largest English language magazine, *Afghan Scene*, they angrily forced the publisher to cut out the images—literally, with scissors—from 9,000 already-printed copies.

"This is not a Muslim fighter, he is Indian or something," said government censor Abdul Raquib Jahid as he jabbed his finger at one of the banned photographs. "This is an insult—or a blasphemy—to jihad."

As it happens, Mr. Mojadidi, who sometimes describes himself as a "Southern Fried Afghan," comes from holy warrior stock himself.

His uncle, Sibghatullah Mujaddedi, was one of the country's most famous

anti-Soviet mujahedeen in the 1980s, and, until recently, chaired Afghanistan's Senate. Mr. Mojadidi himself briefly traveled with his uncle's anti-Communist fighters in 1990 to the front lines in Afghanistan.

At the time, dressed in Converse sneakers and the traditional Afghan shalwar kameez, the artist even fired a couple of mortars at the Soviet-backed government's tanks outside Jalalabad. He drove back to Pakistan the next day, filled with his first jolt of conflict reality.

"I grew up saying: 'I'm Afghan,'" Mr. Mojadidi recalls. "But when I came on that trip when I was 19, I remember thinking: 'I'm not that. My experience is completely different.'"

The next time he returned to Afghanistan was in 2001, when he joined his uncle in a triumphant convoy from Pakistan to Kabul after the fall of the Taliban regime.

The uncle, Mr. Mujaddedi, who had served as interim president of Afghanistan after the fall of the Soviet-backed regime in 1992, oversaw the drafting of a new Afghan constitution.

The white-bearded Afghan leader chuckled quietly when he was first shown his nephew's photographs of the "Jihadi Gangster" series.

"I don't agree with him," Mr. Mujaddedi said while looking over the images in his office as former Taliban government officials sat nearby waiting to confer. "This will make people upset and create problems for him."

Controversy, of course, is what Mr. Mojadidi is courting. His recent run-in with Afghan censors was just the latest round of cultural shenanigans.

In his first big attempt at performance art, Mr. Mojadidi bought an Afghan police uniform in 2009 and set up a fake checkpoint on a road outside Kabul.

Some of his filmed experiment, which he called a "reverse bribe," made its way onto "Danger Bell," Afghanistan's premier political satire TV show.

With video cameras rolling, Mr. Mojadidi flagged down cars, checked their papers and then offered a personal apology—along with \$2 worth of Afghan currency, a significant amount of money here—if the drivers had ever had to pay off a police officer in the past.

On the video, most of the drivers appeared perplexed and initially hesitant to take the cash, perhaps fearing it was some sort of cruel trap. But only four of the 20 drivers turned down the money.

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